Opinion



Pope Francis is pictured with Archbishop Georg Gänswein, prefect of the papal household, during his general audience in Paul VI hall at the Vatican Jan. 15. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Sunday night, I was distressed to realize there would be no fourth season of "Victoria," a drama on Masterpiece on PBS I had come to enjoy last year. But, before bedtime, my phone was ringing off the hook as news broke that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI had coauthored a book with Cardinal Robert Sarah defending the discipline of priestly celibacy. A new and equally compelling drama had begun.

Monday night, news came that an announcement the next day would deny Benedict had intended to coauthor anything. This was much better than any squabble between Prince Albert and Lord Palmerston.

I smelled a rat when the news first broke. It was not inconceivable that Benedict would break his vow to "remain hidden from the world." After all, he broke that vow last year when he published a letter on the origins of the sex abuse crisis that was more sad than anything else. Then, also, it seemed to me that perhaps Benedict was responding to pressure, or seeking to set down a historical marker, or something.

This time, it was obvious that someone was taking advantage of the retired pope. Whether you agreed with the theology of Joseph Ratzinger or not, he was never a careless theologian. Would he lend his name to this obvious indictment of his successor: "It is urgent and necessary for everyone — bishops, priests and lay people — to stop letting themselves be intimidated by the wrong-headed pleas, the theatrical productions, the diabolical lies and the fashionable errors that try to put down priestly celibacy?" Would he put forward an argument he contradicted when he promulgated *Anglicanorum coetibus*, permitting married Anglican clergy into the Church of Rome? Would he sign on to a book that was an obvious challenge to the recently concluded synod where, I am told, Sarah embarrassed himself badly with similarly outrageous assertions? Would he coauthor a book with someone who is increasingly strident, suggesting, for example, that the practice of receiving Communion in the hand rather than on the tongue is "diabolical?" If Ratzinger did this, then the Ratzinger who once commanded respect for his theological gifts has vanished into the past, and only the shell of that man still breathes and walks in the little monastery within the walls of the Vatican.

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Sarah has some explaining to do, assuredly. His decision to publish a letter he had received, purportedly from Benedict but type-written so who knows, attesting to the former pope's involvement in, and approval of, the book project was an attempt to throw Benedict under the bus and save his own hide, or at least his own aspirations to be the conservative candidate at the next conclave, a future Pius XIII. That last ambition is now gone. RIP Pius XIII.

The whole episode was an example of what the Italians call *brutta figura*, a bad look. As I wrote at the time of the "testimony" from former nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, *bella figura* has died:

> *Bella Figura* was 1,705 years old at the time of her death. She was born in February, 313, in the city of Milan when the Emperors Constantine and Licinius ended the persecution of the Christian Church, thus denying one of the clear marks of identification between the founder of the church and her members. As the church became embroiled in politics, first in central Italy and later throughout Europe, *Bella* grew out of genuine concern to keep the church pure, and served usefully as a kind of check on egotistical and irreligious clerics whose only concern was power. Eventually, however, *Bella* found herself consumed by the cancer of power, and she became instrumental in the creation of a clerical culture that valued appearances more than truth, more than integrity, more than the church's own children.

It is not news anymore that high ranking prelates disagree with each other, that the Vatican is beset by turf wars and ideological clashes, that the culture of the hierarchy is capable of gross distortions of the Gospel as well as producing outstanding leaders. We also know that popes age and, like all humans, their intellectual powers decline. We know that by 2004, and perhaps earlier, Pope John Paul II was not making any decisions. Pretending otherwise, seeking to preserve *bella figura* is a fool's errand and an impediment to necessary reform.

Pope Francis has been trying to change the culture of the Vatican since the day of his election, declining to wear the red silk mozzetta when he made his first

appearance on the loggia of St. Peter's, declining the papal limousine in favor of the bus with the cardinals, deciding to reside in a modest apartment in the Vatican's guest house and not in the apostolic palace. Synodality, a joke under John Paul II, improved slightly by Benedict, has come to fruition under Francis. His equanimity, first in the face of Viganò's attack and now in light of this week's soap opera, is remarkable. I suspect he understands that as a culture changes, things can get bumpy. The Vatican has itself become a field hospital for ecclesiology.

That said, admirable, even Christ-like though the pope's patience is, it is time to remove Archbishop Georg Gänswein, the prefect of the papal household and principal aide to Benedict, from the Vatican and send him somewhere else. It was his job to protect Benedict from this kind of mess, not permit it, perhaps even encourage it. Gänswein not only undermined Francis, he was very cruel to Benedict, his patron. The most significant item in every biography of Ratzinger will be his decision to resign the papacy, and that decision is now marred by this involvement with Sarah's book.

Why am I so convinced that Gänswein deserves the principal blame for this mess? It is difficult to overestimate the influence he yields over the former pope. If you set out to write a biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, you would need to really understand the personality of Harry Hopkins, his principal adviser, and the relationship the two men had. Colonel House's relationship with Woodrow Wilson was similarly significant, as was that of Bobby Kennedy with his brother Jack. But none of these advisers had become the *only* adviser to their chief. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Secretary of War Henry Stimson also advised FDR. Roosevelt consulted with Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Admiral Chester Nimitz. Hopkins understood the heart and mind of his chief better than these others, but he did not always win the argument within the White House. When he was pope, Benedict also had many advisers, but now there is only Gänswein, controlling all access, all information flows. As the former pope's physical and mental powers declined, Gänswein's power over him increased. To have abused it so badly warrants his dismissal.

Ecclesiologists will have to wrestle with the significance of this latest kerfuffle, and indeed that wrestling has already begun here in the pages of NCR with contributions from Massimo Faggioli and Richard Gaillardetz. I disagree with the latter about not letting future retired popes live in the Vatican: The alternative is far worse. Can you imagine if Benedict had returned to Bavaria? Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis

would keep him in her palace, surrounded by her "gladiators." Every rightwing nut would make Benedict's residence a pilgrimage site. No. Keep retired popes within the walls, but let the new pope appoint a new secretary for any retired pope.

As Faggioli suggests, let's stop this glorification of papal secretaries, modern day papal nephews, who become high-ranking officials. Before John Paul II elevated Stanislaw Dziwisz to the rank of archbishop in 2003, and Benedict made him a cardinal, papal secretaries did not become power players. Loris Capovilla returned to Bergamo after John XXIII died and was only made an honorary cardinal at age 98. After Paul VI died, John Magee stayed on to help his two successors as private secretary, managed papal liturgies and then became a bishop of a small diocese in Ireland. That is enough. In the case of Gänswein, let the model be that of Mother Pascalina who was sent packing before the body of Pius XII was even cold. It is worth noting that almost no one even knows the name of Francis' secretary.

The upside of all this drama? Francis personally — and his calls for reform — have been enormously strengthened. Gänswein and Sarah thought they could manipulate the post-synodal situation and scuttle any reform of the discipline of celibacy, denying the pope his freedom to decide how to proceed on the recommendations of the synod fathers. They failed. If you strike at the prince, be sure to kill him. Francis — and his reforms — still live. They are now primed to thrive.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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